

ELSIE MAUD INGLIS

A Cameo Life-Sketch



BY
DR. AIMÉE GIBBS.

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POSTSCRIPT.

The writer had the privilege of knowing Dr. Elsie Inglis both as suffragist and as professional colleague; but she wishes to acknowledge her indebtedness to Lady Frances Balfour's excellent biography for most of the facts contained in this sketch.

ELSIE MAUD INGLIS.

A CAMEO LIFE SKETCH.

By DR. ADRIE GIBBS.

"Get leave to work.
In this world 'tis the best you get at all;
For God, in cursing, gives us better gifts than
Than men in benediction.

THE history of the women's movement in the nineteenth century is the story of the struggle of women to get leave to work and to get the necessary education and training and opportunity so as to be able to use their gifts of mind and heart in the service of mankind.

In the fifties, Florence Nightingale who had faced ridicule and opposition so train as a sick nurse went out, in obedience to her country's call, with a devoted band of women to the Crimea, and not only nursed the sick and wounded back to health and strength and brought order out of chaos, but revolutionized the whole system of military hospitals and of sick nursing. Her country was not ungrateful, and voted her a sum of £50,000 for her services, which she used, not for selfish ends, but to endow a training school for nurses.

A decade later the struggle for the Suffrage began with the formation of the National Union of Suffrage Societies, and with the presentation to Parliament by John Stuart Mill of the first petition for the enfranchisement of women, signed by all the representative women of the time.

1870 saw the opening of the first Public Girls' School, the result of twenty years' devoted work by Miss Buss. Newnham and Girton, which made the higher education of women possible, also came into being through the efforts of Miss Clough and Miss Emily Davies. About this time, too, Sophia Jex Blake in Edinburgh, and Miss Garrett in London were struggling to get the portals of the medical profession opened to women.

Thus Elsie Maud Inglis, who was born on 16th August, 1882, had the way prepared for the work she was to do in 1914-1917 by the gallant band of women who, born a generation before her, had already stormed the strongholds of privilege and prejudice and of male monopoly. But if she was fortunate in her social heritage, she was equally fortunate in her individual heredity. She was born into an assured position and into opulent surroundings, her mother being the daughter of an Indian civilian and her father, who came of a good Scotch

family, being also built up in the service. He was a man of great energy and ability, of deep piety and of exceptional breadth of mind and soundness of character. Mrs. Ingles was a woman full of courage and initiative and of marked character and capacity. "Her letters are full of various adventures in camp and high-backed ponies, and none of them without the presence of one of her infants, who was accompanying the parents on their business of Indian official life." When alone in the household with the six other children during the time of the winter she started and ran them successfully a long working man's shift in Westchester and there she looked on winter evenings on religious subjects in general collections of them. Her mother then with such parents Ellen had the heavenly spirit—the peace, the joy and adventure and the dream to "make the world" and so on—her father and mother.

She was born at North Yarm, a beautiful hill station in the Shetlands, constituting a fine view of the snow-capped mountains rising in all their purity and nobility above the heathland wastes of the islands. When you tell what what and glorious memories there, I see the sun at the high still and even her the mother and father and mother and father. She had a very large childhood, watched over by a devoted mother and well-remembered by the great strength of her mother and by the understanding love and understanding of her father, who always gave her children the best of his mind. In this home of natural love and love and of high achievement, she heard the demands of herself to investigation, to make light of the darkness of travelling, to look at difficulties and show all she heard "the spirit of service to mankind."

When her father retired in 1870, he and his family went to Tasmania for two years to settle two sets on the land. At the school Ellen went to the new settlement in having as teachers Mrs. Smith, who had come out from the Chesham school, and Mrs. Smith, who had come out from the Chesham school. On the women's home school, all their practical experience. On the women's home school, all their practical experience. On the women's home school, all their practical experience.

Ellen seems always to have been a leader, for at school in Edinburgh, where the family settled down, she went home for the holidays to live in the adjoining garden. She was not the least hindered when she was told she would have to interview the three school directors herself and also ask the consent of the neighbouring proprietors. She did so and carried her point.

In 1871 she went to a boarding school in Paris, and soon after her return home her mother died "and from that day she shouldered all her father's burdens." There was a beautiful and deep love between them. He always talked to her as to an intellectual equal. When she spoke to him of her wish to be a writer, he set to work at once to overcome the difficulties that

were in the way. She received her first medical teaching at the school that Dr. Jex Blake had founded. Edinburgh University refused to admit women to the medical classes, so every step of the way had to be fought for. The extra-mural teaching was more expensive and occasionally careless and perfunctory. The Royal Infirmary refused to give women clinical teaching in the wards until they had raised £500 to furnish the only two wards in which they were allowed to work. The attitude towards women, who were waiting for the right to work and the right to be trained for that work, was often so intolerably unjust that Elsie or the parents became embittered in soul; but Elsie was saved even then by her own sense of humour and by her father's extraordinary devotion and high-minded outlook. In her student days, she rather pushed herself on not caring about her personal appearance and dressed badly; but later she dressed well, not as a matter of personal adornment, but to further the cause she had at heart.

She completed her medical training in Glasgow, as the facilities there were greater than in Edinburgh, and took a prominent part in the struggle for 'mixed' classes in the Infirmary, a struggle that ended in victory. On qualifying in Infirmary, she went to London as House Surgeon to the New Hospital for Women. Her letters to her father at this time are full of buoyancy and of the joy of work and service. Unlike many women students, she managed to do good work and yet have varied interests. She 'tramped' London and heard all the outstanding teachers, among others Stephen Brooke, as she felt "that men who get into trouble for their opinions are worth listening to, for at least they have opinions." From the first she determined to be a surgeon, and from the first advocated 'mixed classes' and a 'mixed' school.

On leaving London she went for three months to the Rotunda, Dublin, to get more experience in Midwifery. One day a woman came for a doctor and Dr. Inglis went. "Hech," she said, "I come for a doctor." "Well, I'm the doctor. Come along." "Dard no. Ye're no a doctor. Ye're just a woman."

On her return to Edinburgh, she started in practice with Dr. Jessie Macgregor and gradually worked up a large connection. But to her, political and public work was as important as medical. In professional life she found how often the law was against the woman's interests and she wanted a vote in order to equalise the laws and to initiate reforms. She found too that amongst women who had to work for themselves there was no question about wanting the vote and that it was only women who were safe in their own drawing rooms who did not see what it was wanted for. In a letter to her father in her early professional days she says: "I wonder when married women will learn they have any other duty in the world than to obey

their husbands. Women themselves do not seem to think they have any right to any individual existence." Again and again she found the husband suffering his consent to an operation on his wife, though that would mean increased suffering and sometimes death—a right the husband will have, and based on the fact that even so in the case of the law a wife is the property of her husband.

In politics she was a Liberal and a convinced Home Rule. Her father was a Liberal Unionist and made an argument did the two have on the subject of Home Rule for Ireland. She belonged to the Women's Liberal Federation, but was always opposed to their policy of getting party before Woman's Suffrage. She stayed in the Federation as she hoped to convert it to her point of view, but ultimately resigned from it. In her political judgments she was very far-sighted and very independent. Thus in 1901 she was looking forward to the time when there would be one Imperial Parliament and local Councils for Ireland, Scotland and the Colonies, tending to make more the integrity of the Empire and the unity of the English speaking race a far more real thing. Writing in 1901 of the Direct Vote Bill, she recognized that a great many men would keep straight "a negotiation were not shown in their faces." In the early twenties she advocated the appointment of women as sanitary inspectors, a startling innovation at that time.

In 1906, when the Liberals came into power with a large majority, the agitation for the Suffrage entered upon a new phase. "Votes for Women" ceased to be of merely academic interest, but became one of the burning questions of the hour, partly owing to the rise of the militant movement, and partly to the increased Parliamentary support it received from the Labour members in the House of Commons. The Federation of the National Suffrage Societies owed much to her organizing ability and she helped to shape its policy so that when the time came for her to go to the aid of the disabled and the wounded in the battle zone, she went in the strength of the National Union of Suffrage Societies, for without them she could never have made her appeal world wide and raised nearly a quarter of a million pounds for the equipment of the different units. In 1915 the Suffrage cause was unpopular owing to militant tactics and the community wanted to forget the connection between the National Women's Hospitals and the Suffrage Societies. The Church too withheld its support, as it always does from struggling movements, although there were individual ministers who championed the enfranchisement of women through good report and evil report and saw in it a holy crusade. Certainly her long fight for the suffrage helped to temper and steel the spirit of Dr. Elsie Inglis to overcome all difficulties in her determination to minister to the needs of suffering nations. One proud word of her, "She was not a fighter, but it was because

she wanted those out in the cold and darkness to come into the love and light which she herself experienced and sought after always more fully."

Her professional work probably suffered to some extent from her devotion to the Suffrage Cause but for more from "the restricted opportunities for clinical work in her student days, combined with the constant interruptions which the struggle for proper facilities necessitated." Even now, in spite of the advantages they enjoy compared with the pioneers, medical women have not nearly the same opportunities for acquiring skill and experience in surgery that men have. When serving in the Scottish Women's Hospitals abroad, Dr. Inglis rapidly acquired great surgical skill from doing so many operations, showing what a great surgeon she might have become, had she had equal opportunities at home. Knowing how her own work and that of her women colleagues had been handicapped by want of facilities, she advocated fearlessly at home and abroad equal opportunities for work and study in the laboratories, class room and hospital wards for both men and women students and so she came into conflict with the Universities authorities and with the reactionary members of her own profession. But "indomitable, unshaken, unscathed," with smiling open gaze and fearless brow, she fought on until the war opened to her and others the gate of opportunity. She took a keen interest in all women medical students, and offered the hand of welcome to students from abroad and invited them to her home. She was the founder of the Muir Hall of Residence for Women in Edinburgh, and was its Honorary Secretary till her death. But "the child of her love" was the Maternity Hospice in the High Street, Edinburgh, which she founded so that poor women could get rest and skilled treatment near to their own homes and women students could get their midwifery training without going away from Edinburgh. In the Hospice the comfort of the patients was the first consideration. She would not have them awakened early in the morning so that the work of the wards might be got through and she arranged for them to have a cup of tea before anything else was done. The poor blessed her for her work among them and watched for her coming. She gave them of her best—not only skilled treatment but affection and understanding—so that they looked upon her as a trusted friend. It was the same with her paying patients—they were never merely "cases" to her. Her prescriptions were meant as often for the soul as for the body. "My dear, the potter's wheel isn't a pleasant instrument." "Go home and say your prayers." "Realise what you are, a free born child of the Universe, Perfection your Polar Star." Lady Frances Balfour says in her biography, that "no one who knew this unrelenting, unshaking, well balanced life, but felt it had drawn its spiritual strength from the deep wells of salvation." She always used her will-power to do what was best under the circum-

our work is done where they cannot see it. They'll see every bit of this." The scheme was finally adopted by the Scottish Federation of Suffrage Societies, and the name of Scottish Women's Hospitals chosen—these hospitals went forth one by one to France, Belgium, Serbia, Corsica and Russia.

Although the British War Office refused Dr. Inglis official recognition, the French Red Cross gratefully accepted her services and later the Serbian A.M.S. and Red Cross. At the close of 1914 she went to France to see the Scottish Women's Hospital established and working under the French Red Cross at Argenteuil. On her way back, while in Paris, a strange experience happened to her. She went into Notre Dame and "as she sat there, she had a strange feeling that someone was behind her. She resisted the impulse to turn round, thinking it was someone who, like herself, wanted to be quiet! The feeling grew so strong at last that she involuntarily turned round. There was no one near her, but for the first time she realised she was sitting in front of a statue of Joan of Arc. To her it appeared as if the statue was instinct with life. She added: "Wasn't it curious?" then later she said, "I would like to know what Joan was writing to me in me."

For some months after this, Dr. Inglis remained at home directing the many operations necessary to ensure the proper equipment of the units and their conveyance overseas, and in this work she was greatly helped both by the Admiralty and the Foreign Office. In the spring of 1915 she went to Serbia the Foreign Office. In the spring of 1915 she went to Serbia and took charge of the 1st Scottish Unit. Of that time the Serbian Minister writes:—"They were the first to go to the help of Serbia when the Austrians, after they were defeated, besides 10,000 prisoners, also left behind them epidemics in all the districts which they had invaded. The Scottish women turned up their sleeves, so to speak, at the railway station itself, and went straight to work and tended Serbian patients, who were generally dying in the crowded hospitals." Colonel Hunter, who saw much of her work in Serbia said "I have never met with anyone who gave me so deep an impression of single-mindedness, gentle benevolence, clear and purposeful vision, wise judgment and absolutely fearless disposition." For three months the typhus epidemic raged, and then as the fever abated, the country was overrun by Germans, Austrians, Magyars and Bulgarians. In October 1915 the Serbians began the retreat and the hospitals had to be evacuated. The Scottish Women remained with the Serbian wounded and were taken prisoners, with the exception of two parties who went with the retreating Serbs. They were allowed to go on with their work and nursed from 400 to 1,200 patients in a hospital meant for 400. The sanitation and the laundry were also put in their charge. Dr. Inglis describes the trying tasks the unit undertook to improve the sanitation: "When we arrived, the hospital compound was a

wounded and Dr. Inglis and her doctors and nurses performed operations and did dressings for fifty-eight hours out of sixty-three," and this in spite of the fact that her health was rapidly failing. At Reni they were taken for spies and put in two very anxious days, but they stuck to their guns and the misunderstanding was soon cleared up. They left Reni to join the Serbian division; but when the Russian Revolution imperilled the safety of the Serbian army on the Rumanian front, Dr. Inglis brought the Unit home, but she refused to return until the British authorities made arrangements to bring the Serbian army away from the Russian front. On the transport with her and her Unit were the representatives of the Serbian army with whom she had served. Throughout the voyage, although stricken with mortal illness, she was making plans to take the unit on to join the Serbs at Salonika. When the transport arrived at Newcastle, she insisted on getting up to say good-bye to the Serbian staff, although she knew, the summons had come to her to "go forth." Erect and unsupported, her shrunken form clad in the grey uniform with the faded ribbons, her face solemn and drawn, she said a few words to each officer in turn, as he kissed her hand.

She left the boat on Sunday afternoon and died the following day, 20th September, 1917. Her last hours were spent in sending farewell messages to her committees, units, friends and relations—no one was forgotten. To her niece she remarked "It will be grand starting a new job over there," then added with a smile, "although there are two or three jobs here I would like to have finished." When her sister, Mrs. McLaren, commented on the magnificent work she had done, she replied, "Not I, but my unit." She met the unknown with a cheer, as she had met it throughout life, and when she was gone, "there remained with those who loved her only a great sense of triumph and perfect peace," a feeling not of death, but of glorious life.

Her people brought her body back to Edinburgh. On the coffin as it rested in St. Giles' Cathedral were placed the flags of Great Britain and Serbia. By the order of the Scottish Command the honour of a military funeral was accorded her, but this was the only official recognition of a heroic work and a heroic personality. She was decorated with the orders of France, Russia and Serbia, but not with her own country's. "Why did they not give her the Victoria Cross" asked the shawl-draped women, with the children Dr. Inglis had "brought home" clinging to their skirts, as the gun-carriage bearing her mortal remains passed slowly through the grief-stricken crowds that lined the streets of Edinburgh that grey November day in 1917.

But the heart of the people beats true and though the State has not yet seen fit to raise a memorial to the honour of a great woman, the work of Dr. Elsie Inglis is to be immortalised by

the erection of a hospital in Berlin where women can be trained and medical students gain experience and by the endowment and enlargement of the Maternity Hospital and Child Welfare Centre she started in the High Street, Edinburgh.

The promoters in woman's adoption, into whose labours Dr. Inglis entered, were women of vision and understanding. They recognised that even though women had mental capacity—which some men have denied—as the efficient work they must be given opportunities of education and training. Dr. Inglis said the first she said them by opening fresh fields of human endeavour to women. On one occasion writing about her work in Russia she said: "I saw that there was no good in the world telling about regular field hospitals to them. The ordinary male doctors in our capacity cannot be argued over. It can only be worked over."





At the untimely of the loss of Dr. Elsie Inglis that November the Belgian sculptor presented to the Scottish nation, a distinguished Scotswoman, speaking of the work accomplished by her, said, "The war has taught us this one lesson at least that advancement depends upon opportunities." It will be well for men and women and well for the State if the nation remembers that lesson and gives women the opportunity to become efficient by throwing open to them every trade and profession on equal terms with men. It is not given to all of us to be great like Dr. Elsie Inglis, but had she not had the opportunity to qualify in medicine and to help in the organisation of a great Suffrage movement, she would not have been ready on the outbreak of war to bring a trained mind and skilled hands—even though her heart was overflowing with sympathy—to the relief of stricken Serbia."

The Serbs speak of her as "the angel of their people." In October, 1915, they commemorated her services to them by building a beautiful fountain in her honour close to the camp hospital at Wladimirov. It may be that in years to come the name of Doctor Elsie Inglis will be as much revered in Serbia as is the name of Jeanne d'Arc in France today and that she too will be canonised as a saint by a grateful people. Was this what Jean was wanting to say to her in the Cathedral of Notre Dame?



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